

2011 Explorer appears far less 'trucky' than its predecessor

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All this in a mid-size sport utility that looks pretty darn big, begging the question— is this the right vehicle for our time?

Fuel prices may be out of control in this country, but in the U.S., a market 10 times our size and where marketing decisions are made, gas is relatively cheap and the SUV shows no signs of going away. South of the border, the utility segment accounts for 32 per cent of the industry.

So it makes sense for the company to maintain a strong presence, and the Explorer, which according to Ford still enjoys 96 per cent name recognition, provided both an opportunity and a challenge. This vehicle may have defined the look of the traditional, pickup-styled SUV since its debut in 1991, but with sales going the way of the portable CD player, it was time for an extreme makeover.

"Let's create the SUV for the 21st century," said Frank Davis, Executive Director, North America Product Development. "Not just a refresh of the old Explorer."

He was speaking at the North American press launch where Canadian and American journalists were on hand to actually drive the vehicle that was revealed in July of this year.

"SUV buyers of the 21st Century are more demanding," he continued. "They want better fuel economy—it's the number one reason people say 'no' to SUVs. They want better vehicle dynamics, su-



Inside, the all-new 2011 Explorer is fitted out like a premium SUV. Available features include leather-trimmed power and heated front seats, adjustable pedals with memory, rearview camera, dual-panel moonroof, and a hands-free connectivity system to operate climate settings, navigation, phone and entertainment.

rior ride, handling and steering. They want it all."

And to accomplish that, Ford seems to have left nothing untouched.

The 2011 Explorer appears far less trucky than its predecessor, but it still resembles an SUV. Its exterior is cleaner and more sophisticated than the previous generation, looking more premium that you'd expect in this segment.

Up front is the signature Ford grille, with bold, wide bars that are perforated top and bottom. This is flanked by wrap-around projector-style headlamps that follow the contours over the bulging wheel arches. With optional wheels up to 20-inches, the Explorer looks firmly planted.

The new model is also longer and wid-

er than before, and despite having more content is 45 kg lighter. It is also able to seat seven—and I don't just mean kids in back.

Adjusting the front and second-row seats to suit a couple of larger journalists, I had ample head and kneeroom for my five-foot-nine frame.

And getting back there is easy.

A simple push of a button both tumbles and slides forward the second-row seat on the passenger side. Also convenient is the optional power folding feature for the third row. You can drop either one or both seats for a flat cargo floor and 1,240 litres of cargo space.

Drop both rows and you get 2,285 litres. Getting your stuff in back is made eas-

ier with the available power liftgate with programmable height adjust. It can be opened with the key fob or buttons on the instrument panel and cargo area.

With a 5,000-lb capacity, the V6-powered model is also fairly adept at towing. Even though, according to company officials, 85 per cent of buyers don't tow and 12 per cent pull less than 5,000 lbs.

I'm not much into towing myself and appreciated the available driver aids such as Trailer Sway Control (automatically cuts engine speed and applies braking to counter sway), Tow/Haul mode (increases engine braking on steep grades) and Hill Start Assist to help keep you from creeping backward when lifting off the brake.

And to make hooking up easier, there's even an available rear view camera with zoom-in feature.

It's the new standard powertrain, a 3.5 litre V6 that delivers 290 hp and 255 lb/ft. of torque, that allows for this capability. Mated to a six-speed automatic (versus last year's five-speed), this engine delivers 80 more hp than the outgoing 4.0-litre V6 while offering 20 per cent better fuel economy at 11.9/8.0L/100 km (city/hwy - FWD). And it's just two horses shy of the outgoing 4.6-litre V8.

There's also a turbocharged 2.0-litre four-cylinder EcoBoost engine on the way. It's rated at 237 hp and 255 lb/ft of torque, with peak torque available from a low 1,700 rpm.

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